

DHARMA TALK

The Lotus Blossoms in the Lowlands

Making the Buddha's Birth Our Own

By George Bowman, JDPSN

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When the Buddha's mother, Maya, was nearing the time to give birth, she was away from her hometown visiting. Realizing that she didn't have much time, she started returning home. On her way she passed Lumbini Park; it was ablaze with fragrant flowers and alive with the songs of birds and the humming of bees. There in the park, the mother of the Buddha-to-be stopped to rest and appreciate the beauty of the flowers. She was tired from her long walk, and forgot herself in the fragrance. Completely absorbed in the beauty of her surroundings, the weariness of her journey forgotten, she reached up to touch a spring blossom. It was precisely at this moment that the Buddha was born.



As the story goes, the Buddha slid effortlessly from her armpit. He slid without effort or will into this world and immediately stood up and took seven steps to the east; seven steps west; then seven steps north, and seven steps south. Then standing in the center, right in the middle of his experience, he stopped and, raising his right hand, pointed to heaven, and with his left, pointed to the earth. He said, "Heaven above and earth below, I am the Holy One."

Now, I myself have never seen a birth quite like this, but this is how the story goes. And this baby walked fearlessly into all of human experience and saw nothing but himself. There was no separation right from the beginning. No gap, no division, for doubt and confusion to creep in. Standing in the center of his experience, there was nothing to see and nothing to run away from.

We celebrate this mind today. As part of some Zen traditions, they chant daily:

*May we extend this mind over all beings
So that we and the world together
May attain maturity in Buddha's wisdom.*

I don't know if any of you have been present at the birth of a baby or not. I had the good fortune of being present at the birth of Nancy and Bill Highsmith's baby. It so happens that Nancy is sitting with us today, and the baby I saw being born is Bubs, who is playing outside. Bubs' birth is the only one I have had the opportunity to see. He was born in a house across the street from Providence Zen Center where Nancy and Bill, both senior students of Zen, were living at the time. They decided they would invite some of their good friends from the Sangha to the birthing. So about eight of us went over and sat with Bill and Nancy and the midwife through the whole process.

Somehow, Bubs didn't slide effortlessly out of his mother's armpit the way the Buddha had done. It was a lot of very hard work and there were tears and sweat, fears that something might go wrong, and a tremendous amount of encouragement from all of us there for Nancy's efforts.

It wasn't a scene covered with flower petals and filled with the songs of birds and the humming of bees. It was filled with a poignancy in the midst of the hard work, a sense of awe that something so basic was taking place that was a total mystery. How does life give birth to life? Will everything be all right? During the transition before Bubs was born, a fierce, restless upset appeared in the room. Nancy seemed so tired. Then with

a certain ease born of intense effort, a baby emerged and the room was filled with the presence and luminosity of life.

Old Vimalakirti said that the lotus does not blossom in the soil of high meadows, it blooms in the lowlands, in the midst of the messiness of everyday life. It was not that Nancy's pain and effort and the process were transformed into something else, something beautiful. Each moment, just as it is, is the lotus.

In the vividness of watching a baby being born, this truth is undeniable. Without any separation from what's going on, we are simply life happening in all its immense beauty. This pure experience melts down our preoccupation with our own personal condition and opinions and we can no longer withdraw into saying, "It's my life," or "It's your life." That which we can never know or understand blossoms as this moment.

There are all kinds of births taking place in each moment. There are all kinds of deaths taking place in the same moment. That is quite an incredible happening.

Dogen said, "Just understand that birth and death is itself Nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as birth and death to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death."

Some births are hard, some are easy. When I was a small boy I dreamed of being a naturalist. I would spend summer days tramping through the marsh searching for snakes and frogs. I remember one day coming upon a still, sunlit pond where a very fat water snake was sunning herself, lying perfectly still. I stopped to admire her, I wanted to melt into the surroundings so I wouldn't frighten her away. In a little while she began to quiver and a tiny little snake was born, a tiny completely formed snake. Then another little snake appeared and wriggled off completely independent of its mother, and then another was born, and then another. I sat and watched and counted one, two, three, fifteen, thirty-seven of these creatures come out and wriggle off into the swamp. Off they went into their lives, completely dependent on and simultaneously independent of their mother.

This snake, this baby, this Buddha was born thanks to its mother. A mother who forgot herself in the activity of just doing. Each one was completely absorbed in this moment and gave birth to something wonderful.

How do we give birth to ourselves as Buddhas? We become what we already are. And what are we? We are this very moment. Our practice is to give ourselves to it completely and become ourselves.

Of course, the most challenging part of our practice is to give birth to ourselves. To completely be ourselves without having to add something or take something away. The great teachers in the Zen tradition have all had this ability to be completely and authentically themselves . . . no need to try and be any version of someone else.

When Zen Master Ummon was told the fanciful story of the Buddha's birth he said, "Why, if I had been there, I would have beaten him with my Zen stick and fed him to a hungry dog and the entire world would have been at peace." Ummon had done a little "birthing" on his own. He had no use whatsoever for any Winter/Spring 1990

kind of mythology, no use for an overlay of images or ideas or the way it "might" or "ought" to be. His practice was to be each moment as it is. As Master Rinza said, "to place no head above your own." Ummon knew without the least shadow of doubt that each moment, as it is, is the truth happening.

So Ummon's life was authentic and unshakable. Sometimes a happy Buddha, sometimes a sad Buddha, but always just this. So when people asked old Ummon about the truth of Buddhism, rather than giving a long lecture he would answer by giving one word.

When Ummon was asked what is the profound and utmost dharma, he could reply without the slightest hint of self-consciousness, "A sesame bun." What a wonderful reply! Imagine Ummon sitting enjoying his tea and sesame buns in the morning and being able to say without the slightest hesitation or shadow of doubt, "Yeah, this is the truth. I am completely embraced by Buddha's wisdom and there is nothing outside it whatsoever. There is absolutely nothing to seek. No place to look for something else, some becoming, some something I might get that somebody else can understand."

On another occasion, wonderful old Ummon was sitting in meditation in his hermitage by himself, doing a quiet, solo retreat in the winter; a monk heard about it and couldn't help but sneak up to Ummon's hermitage and interrupt his solitude. The monk broke into that silence and asked, "Zen Master, what is the most wonderful thing?" and Ummon replied, "Sitting alone on this mountain." That was Ummon's reply.

Put yourself in Ummon's position and suppose someone came up to you. Here you are sitting alone in the mountains, and someone sneaks up to you and catches you completely unprepared; you haven't rehearsed your lines, you didn't know what you were supposed to be, or what kind of practice you were supposed to be doing and some monk or nun appears in front of you, prostrates himself or herself, and asks, not as a Zen game, but with complete sincerity, "What is the most wonderful thing in your life?" What can you say? Are you, in that moment, making your life a clear and straightforward expression of what you know in your heart of hearts to be true, without any doubt? And can you reply, "Sitting alone on this mountain?"

Today on Buddha's birthday we celebrate this endless life that continually gives birth to itself — as baby Bubs, as water snakes, as you and me. One Bodhisattva vow says:

*When I, a student of Dharma,
Look at the real form of the universe,
All is the never failing manifestation
Of the mysterious truth of the Tathagata.
In any event, in any moment,
And in any place,
None can be other than the marvelous revelation
Of its glorious light.*

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